



Back from the brink

RENUKA SURYANARAYAN

*Woh karib tha ya woh paas tha
Mujhe aaj tak yeh pata nahi*

THE familiar, sweet voice struggles with the diction before it is okayed, much to the relief of everyone around. Someone shouts 'break' and it's a breather for the singer. A singer who has just come out of hibernation after 15 years with this recording of her new album *Swapna Chaltaraha*, releasing in January next year.

It is difficult to associate the plump figure in a crumpled dress and dishevelled hair as Sulakshana Pandit (remember her famous

Actress-singer
Sulakshana
Pandit makes a
comeback with a
ghazal album,
15 years after
she gave up the
spotlight

song *Yeh mulakat ek bahana hai*), the sweet-toned Kashmiri who entered Hindi films with the hit song *Bekarar dil tu gaye ja*. The voice that sang *Apne jeevan ki uljhan ko kaise mein suljhaon*, ironically struggled for years to face the realities of life.

Was Pandit another victim of the fickle film industry? Her reply is surprisingly matter-of-fact, "For the last 15 years, I have been very sick. I had a nervous breakdown. Even doctors felt that I would not survive." That was the time she had just carved a niche for herself with films like the Jeetendra-starrer *Khandann*. "I had stopped acting, stopped singing, everything. I just forced myself to do dubbing.

Even that came to a stop at the sight of my mother in a coma, which worsened my condition," says Pandit in that distinct child-woman voice that added to her success in films like *Sankalp*.

Her mother's death was too much of a shock for someone who had already seen a beloved die before her eyes. "Sanjeev Kumar's death was a blow. He had just told me, 'Come tomorrow and we'll discuss our marriage.' The next day, he was dead." So what brought her back from the brink? "Atul Srivastava, who is singing with me in this album, wanted me to do it. He gave me the confidence to come back to the studios," says Pandit. Srivastava, who helps her get the lines right, nods in agreement. "People asked me why I was approaching her for this album. However, when I talked to her, I found that she still has that fire in her," he says.

Pandit began her singing career at nine and went on to be called the 'Queen of Bengal', before Bollywood beckoned. She came to Mumbai to stay with her uncle Pandit Jasraj and get a foothold into films. Today, she lives a lonely life in her sprawling Juhu flat. Pandit's skirmishes with the Mangeshkars are best forgotten, she feels. "I just wanted to sing my own songs and when producers wanted it otherwise, I stopped complaining," she shrugs today.

It's take-time again and the voice goes back to the ghazal:

*Na to usne ki koi dillagi
Nahi maine ki koyi berukhi
Jaane isme kiska kusoor tha?*